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Why I Resigned From the Trotsky Defense Committee

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Why I Resigned From the Trotsky Defense Committee

Mr. Felix Morrow, Acting Secretary,
American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky,
Room 511, 22 East 17th Street,
New York, N. Y.

Dear Sir:

It has become necessary for me to clarify my position with respect to the Moscow trials and particularly with respect to Trotsky's relation thereto.

Since joining your committee I have given deep and earnest thought to the whole problem here involved. I have examined, so far as they have been made available in this country, all of the documents bearing upon the case. I have followed closely all of the news reports. I have consulted some of the reports made by non-Communists who attended the first trial. I have carefully studied the published arguments of the partisans on both sides. And I have just as carefully restudied the writings of Trotsky concerning his case against Stalinism and his theory of the permanent revolution, that is, such of his writings on these questions as have been published to date.

I believed when I joined your committee, and I still believe, in the right of asylum for persons exiled because of their political or other beliefs. Trotsky has been granted asylum in Mexico and this part of the committee's task would seem, therefore, to have been brought to a close.

Second, there was in my mind at that time sufficient doubt

concerning certain aspects of the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial to lead me to suppose that the trial was not entirely genuine. This doubt hinged upon the possibility that, while Zinoviev and his associates had been taken in conspiracy (for I have never seen any good reason to doubt their own guilt), they had been promised mitigation of their sentences in return for a public confession that would implicate Trotsky as well in their crimes. In view of this doubt I was glad to join with the committee in endeavoring to provide Trotsky with an opportunity to answer the charges brought against him. This was not because of any desire to be "just" or "liberal" in the meaningless sense that those terms are usually employed by American liberals, but simply because I would have regarded it as hardly less reprehensive and dangerous to the future of socialism for Stalin and his colleagues to be perverting Soviet justice to their own personal ends as for Trotsky to be plotting to overthrow the government of the only socialist republic in the world.

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Very soon after the first trial, Zinoviev and his associates were executed. It has been asserted that they had been promised lenient treatment if they would for their part publicly accuse Trotsky of having conspired with them to overthrow Stalin and the Soviet government. In truth, it was largely upon this supposition that rested the contention that the first trial was a "frame-up". But now that the men were put to death Trotsky and his adherents declared that they, the defendants, had been "double-crossed". To the Trotskyites this was further proof of their contention that the first trial had been "framed". To the disinterested student, however, it might just as easily have proved the contrary. After all, it is one of the simplest rules of logic that one cannot use a premise to prove a thesis and then use the denial of that premise to prove the same thesis. Logically, therefore, one should have looked elsewhere for an explanation of the executions, and

the only other possible explanation was that the men were actually put to death in the regular course of justice and for the single reason that they were guilty of the crimes charged against them. Still it was possible, despite the rise of this counter-doubt, that they had been "double-crossed".

Now we have come to the second trial. What is the situation? The men now on trial cannot possibly be under any delusion as to their fate. They must know and they do know that they will be put to death. Despite this they do not hesitate to confess their crimes. Why? The only conceivable answer is that they are guilty. Surely it cannot and will not be argued this time as well that there has been a "deal", for men like Radek are obviously not so stupid as to believe that they are going to save their lives in that manner after what happened to Kamenev and Zinoviev. It has been said that they have been tortured into confessing. But what greater and more effective torture can there be than knowledge of certain death? In any case, the men in the courtroom have shown not the slightest evidence of having been tortured or of being under duress. It is said by some that they have been hypnotized into confessing, or that the prosecution, working upon its knowledge of Slav psychology, has somehow trapped these men into confessing deeds of which they are not guilty. For example, the unanimity with which the men have been confessing is taken as proof that the confessions are false and have been obtained by some mysterious means. Yet these assertions rest upon no tangible or logical proof whatever. The idea that some inexplicable form of oriental mesmerism has been used is one that sound reason must reject as utterly fantastic. The very unanimity of the defendants, far from proving that this trial is also a "frame-up", appears to me to prove directly the contrary. For if these men are innocent, then certainly at least one of the three dozen, knowing that he faced death in any case, would have blurted out the truth. It is inconceivable that out of this great number of defendants, all should lie when lies would not do

one of them any good. But why look beyond the obvious for the truth, why seek in mysticism or in dark magic for facts that are before one's very nose? Why not accept the plain fact that the men are guilty? And this fact, if accepted with regard to the men now on trial, must also be accepted with regard to the men who were executed after the first trial.

* * *

I now see no valid reason for believing that the defendants in the first trial were unfairly dealt with. Certainly it cannot now be maintained that they were "double-crossed", for that contention falls of its own weight when we stop for a moment to consider the fact that the Soviet government has brought a second group of men to trial on the same charges. Since the government could not hope to induce the second group to confess under the pressure of false promises, it is reasonable to suppose that it did not rely upon false promises in the first case. Moreover, I am now completely convinced that the defendants in the first trial were given every opportunity to clear themselves, that they were denied none of the rights of impartial justice. It is significant that those who contend that this was not the case have offered no evidence at all, apart from their own unsupported allegations and suspicions, in substantiation of their contention. On the other side we have not only the court record, but also the unsolicited reports of non-Communist observers who were present at the trial.

One such statement has been presented by D. N. Pritt, English lawyer and a Labor Party representative in the House of Commons. Mr. Pritt can by no means be accused of sympathy with the Communists or with Stalin. He has, indeed, stood with the Right wing of the Labor Party. But he has also been trained in law, while, moreover, unlike Walter Citrine and others who have charged that there was a gross miscarriage of justice, he was present in person at the trial in Moscow. He reported later that he was "completely satisfied" that the trial was "properly

conducted" and that the accused were "fairly and judicially treated". He added that their appearance and demeanor were such as to indicate the "absence of any ill-treatment or fear". He declared that there was "no ground for insinuating any unfairness in form or substance". His view has been confirmed by all other non-Communist observers at the trial whose reports I have consulted. To be sure, Trotsky has now taken to denouncing Pritt for having rendered this "service" to "Stalinism". But Trotsky has produced no evidence at all to show that Pritt was in any way prejudiced in favor of the Stalin government. Indeed, if I may repeat, while the evidence that the men were fairly tried appears both substantial and convincing, the counter-charge that they were not fairly tried is backed up by no evidence of any kind, convincing or otherwise. The same can be said for the conduct of the second trial so far as that has been reported to date.

It is a curious fact, which seems to have escaped liberals both in this country and in England, that the Soviet government is hurting itself far more than it could possibly help itself by holding these trials, especially at this time. The very fact that the liberals and Socialists have been aroused by this event, the very fact that this defense committee has been formed, reveal the great extent to which the Soviet Union is being harmed. What has Stalin to gain by taking action that is tending to alienate these elements? It is obvious that he has nothing whatever to gain. On the contrary, he stands to lose a good deal. At the moment there is grave danger of intervention. The Soviet government needs all the support it can get from workers and liberals and democrats in other countries. Without such support the rising tide of fascism might soon engulf Soviet Russia—whereupon, of course, Stalin and his government would inevitably disappear.

Shall we suppose, then, that Stalin has stupidly thrown all caution to the wind merely to wreak vengeance upon his personal enemies? Shall we suppose that he is anxious to have popular

fronts erected to guard the Soviet Union against an external danger and at the same time is so blind as to take action that might destroy these popular fronts in order to satisfy some purely personal whim or ambition? Shall we suppose that he is so thick-headed as not to appreciate the gravity of this external danger not only to the Soviet Union but to himself as well? Now, no one will say that Stalin is stupid. Even the Trotskyites complain that the menace of "Stalinism" lies not in stupidity but in diabolical cleverness. It must follow, since the Stalin government is apparently risking a good deal by holding these trials, that it has detected an internal danger hardly less grave than the external danger. In short, it must follow that the government has uncovered a conspiracy against itself, the evidence of which is so abundant and the peril from which is so apparent that it dare not withhold its hand, even though in destroying the conspiracy it may alienate its democratic support abroad and so increase the external danger.

Until now we have considered only the conspirators in Moscow. Little has been said of Leon Trotsky. Is he guilty, too? The conspirators say that he is. He denies it most emphatically (and brings other charges of equal gravity against Stalin). We have the Moscow evidence. Where is Trotsky's evidence? One may grant that he has not had his day in court. And one may grant that toward the end of his stay in Norway he was literally held incommunicado. Yet he has been out of Norway now for several weeks, and still no tangible proof of his contentions has come from him, no documents, not even anything in the way of circumstantial statements. He has issued nothing but negative denials. Even some of these denials are of a questionable sort. His gratuitous attack upon D. N. Pritt, offered without any supporting facts, certainly did not help him. His statement that he had never heard of Vladimir Romm, a leading Soviet journalist and for years a stellar correspondent for Tass and later for *Izvestia*, is simply incredible and goes far, indeed, toward

discrediting Trotsky. But this is the sort of "proof" he has been cabling to *The New York Times*, the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Manchester Guardian.*

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If Trotsky is innocent and has the documentary proof of his innocence that he says he has, why does he not produce it? The Hearst press would be only too glad to publish it and pay Trotsky fabulously well for his documents. *The New York Times*, the *London Times*, and other bourgeois journals would likewise be only too happy to give space to his documents. The *Manchester Guardian* has stood by him through thick and thin in the last several months; it would not desert him now. It has been said that he intends to put his proof into the new book he is writing on Stalinism. And it might also be argued that it would be better for him to put his proof before the projected international commission that is to give him a hearing. But consider the absurdity, the astounding cynicism, of such an attitude. Here are men awaiting death on charges that Trotsky says are utterly false and here is Trotsky who contends that he can prove that they are false—and yet he withholds this indispensable proof for the sake of a book, or for the sake of an international inquiry not yet arranged! And here are countless liberals and Socialists who earnestly believe that justice is being destroyed at the command of Stalin, but who have not a shred of evidence to support this belief apart from their own fears and suspicions, and here is Trotsky who has the essential evidence—and yet he fails to produce it when it is most needed.

Consider one thing further. Trotsky has in recent years written many books and pamphlets expounding his doctrine of the permanent revolution and purporting to expose Stalin and Stalinism. He contends, not once but again and again, that Stalin must be overthrown if the revolution is to be saved. Now either Trotsky's arguments and exhortations are wholly passive and academic, in which case they might well be forgotten, or else he means that

they should be acted upon. It is obvious, however, that Trotsky is playing no passive role, that he is consciously the agitator, and that he regards himself as the active leader of the movement against Stalin. That stands out from every line he has written on the problem and it is apparent from all his activities. But how is Stalin to be overthrown? It is clear, even to Trotsky's followers, that there can be no hope of provoking a popular uprising within the Soviet Union. It could only be done by foreign intervention, or by a conspiracy within the Soviet government, or by a combination of the two. Through whom might such a conspiracy be undertaken? Obviously, through persons within the government who have had experience in such work in the past. Even more obviously, by old conspirators who believe, or once believed, in Trotsky's doctrine. And what have the Moscow trials revealed? They have revealed precisely this kind of conspiracy. They have revealed the very sort of plot against the Soviet government that Trotsky's teachings call for!

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To be sure, this in itself does not prove that Trotsky has conspired with the Moscow defendants. Yet the reasonable man is compelled to agree that, given Trotsky's known disposition to action and his forceful presentation of his own case against Stalin, the circumstantial evidence against him is very strong indeed. It might well be said, and it cannot be denied, that the Soviet government's case against Trotsky is not perfect. It has made mistakes. It has made assertions that are apparently contrary to fact. But then, there has never been a controversy in which the facts on one side have been all black and those on the other side pure white. One must judge these matters, not by any rigid or absolute standards, but by weighing the evidence. And in the present instance the preponderance of evidence is on the side of the Soviet government and clearly against Trotsky.

I readily agree that Stalin has his faults. I am far from agree-

ing with everything that the Soviet government and Comintern have done or are doing. Yet every fair-minded person must concede that under its present leadership the Soviet Union has made remarkable progress toward establishing socialism. It is only among the Nazis and fascists and reactionaries in other countries, among a few groups within the Second International, and among the Trotskyites that it is contended that the Soviet Union under Stalin and his associates is moving, not toward socialism, but toward capitalism or Bonapartism or something called "Red fascism". Persons acquainted with the facts must and do consider these allegations preposterous. One who has an understanding of economics can readily see that it is socialism and nothing else that is being developed in Soviet Russia. To make any statement to the contrary is, in view of the established facts, mere wish-thinking—or deliberate distortion. This being so, any attack upon the Communist leadership in the Soviet Union, imperfect though that leadership might be, that has for its purpose the overthrow of the Soviet government must be regarded as a deliberate and malicious attack upon socialism itself. This does not mean that I regard the Soviet government as being above criticism. Far from it. But it does mean that I regard dishonest criticism or any effort to go beyond criticism (for example, an effort to destroy rather than to aid in the development of socialism in the Soviet Union) as a betrayal of socialism. And that, quite apart from the outcry against the Moscow trials, is the objective purpose of Trotsky's writings and agitational activities. If one is inclined to doubt this, one has only to compare Trotsky's writings on "Stalinism" with the Webbs' study of socialism in the Soviet Union.

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Let us now sum up the situation. On the one hand we have the confessions of the Moscow defendants, the court record. the statements of disinterested observers at the first trial, and the reports on the second trial of such reputable journalists as Walter Duranty.

These provide us with an abundance of evidence tending to prove that the defendants were fairly tried and that their guilt in conspiring to overthrow the Soviet government has been established. They also tend to prove that Trotsky participated in the conspiracy, or that he at least had guilty knowledge of it, though the direct proof of his part in the crime is not so substantial as that involving the men on trial. However, we also have his writings and they tend greatly to strengthen the presumption, if not of actual guilt, at least of moral responsibility. On the other hand, we have nothing concrete with which to offset the charge of conspiracy. We have only the unsupported allegations of Trotsky and the unverified fears and suspicions of numerous liberals and Socialists.

Possibly Trotsky can support his allegations. He should certainly not be denied the opportunity to produce the proof he says he has. But his reluctance or inability to produce his proof when it is most needed must count against him. Moreover, and this is a point of extreme importance, it has to be borne in mind that Trotsky is not a disinterested party. He does not come into court with clean hands. He is a sworn adversary of the Stalin government. It must be presumed, therefore, that he is at least equally as much interested, and in all probability far more interested, in carrying on his campaign to destroy the Stalin government as he is in obtaining abstract justice for himself. Let him state that it is justice alone that he desires, and then let him publicly promise that, in the event he fails to substantiate his allegations against the Soviet government, he will promptly cease his efforts to destroy that government. If he refuses to bind himself in this particular, the reasonable man must conclude that he is using his demand for justice solely as a means of enlisting additional support for his campaign against socialism in the Soviet Union. Chronologically, indeed, the evidence on this point is already against him. The outcry against the Moscow trials first came from the Trotskyites. It was they who first raised the

charge that Soviet justice was being hamstrung by Stalin. It was not until later that certain disinterested liberals took up the cry. There can be no question that the Trotskyites knew, when they shouted "persecution", that they would win the sympathy and perhaps the active aid of these liberals. And there can be little question that this, rather than justice, was their true objective. Surely if they really believed, as they asserted, that the Stalin government knew no law and no justice, then they could not have expected the liberals to help obtain justice from the Stalin government for them. And as they still maintain this position, it is only logical to suppose that their real purpose in appealing to the liberals was not to win justice for themselves, but to win liberal support for Trotskyism, that is, for Trotsky's campaign against socialism in the Soviet Union, and to do so in the name of that holy but meaningless liberal principle known as abstract justice.

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In any case, at least until Trotsky comes into court with his own hands clean, I shall remain convinced that the present liberal movement to win justice for him is nothing more than a Trotskyite maneuver against the Soviet Union and against socialism. I am equally convinced, as I must be under the circumstances, that the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky has, perhaps unwittingly, become an instrument of the Trotskyites for political intervention against the Soviet Union. Indeed, apart from the considerations cited above, it is abundantly plain that the whole approach and phraseology of the committee has been radically altered since the committee was formed. For example, those who were invited to join were asked to do so in order to provide Trotsky with "the fullest opportunity to state his case". But now the committee's literature talks of "working for a complete and impartial investigation of the Moscow trials". The implications of this change in attitude are too obvious to need emphasizing here. It is the liberal who would give Trotsky

an opportunity to be heard, but it is only the Trotskyite (or someone else with an ax to grind where the Communist Party is concerned) who would demand the sort of political intervention that would be required to undertake "a complete and impartial investigation of the Moscow trials". This is nothing but propaganda. It shows all too plainly that the Trotskyites have captured the committee.

Perhaps the liberal members are not aware of the real nature of the committee. But that cannot be true of the political members, of the Trotskyites and others, who have but one purpose and that is to use the committee as a springboard for new attacks upon the Soviet Union. I do not intend under any circumstances to allow myself to become a party to any arrangement that has for its objective purpose (whatever might be its subjective justification) the impairment or destruction of the socialist system now being built in Soviet Russia. You will, therefore, withdraw my name as a member of the committee.

It may be unnecessary to point out that I speak for no party and no faction. I do not now belong and have never belonged to any political party or political organization. I speak for myself alone.

It is, however, necessary to add that I am putting copies of this letter at the disposal of certain individuals and groups who no doubt will be interested in its contents.

Respectfully,

MAURITZ A. HALLGREN.

Glenwood, Md., January 27, 1937.